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Reading in Croatia - past and present

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The title of my paper suggest a long and exhaustively historical reconstruction of the reading in Croatia, but according to my personal experience, the human endurance in similar circumstances, and especially the human patience, is very limited, therefore I will reduce my speech to twenty minutes, not more.

At the beginning I will give you a brief introduction about the historical situation in the Croatian lands during the past 13 centuries, from the immigration of the Croats in the east coast of the Adriatic Sea to this day. This land is very beautiful indeed, but the coast with so many havens and harbours were extremely important for the navigation of the sailing-vessels and the warships, of course not only Croatia, but for all the others as well. So, the Croats soon after their coming in the Adriatic coast became aware that living in this beautiful land is very dangerous. Many nations and empires were interested in dominate this strategic littoral. First the Byzantines, then the Franks, the Venetian Republic, the Hungarians, Turks, Austrians, Germans, Italians, French, Serbs, Montenegrins etc. have had the plans to control not only the coast, but also the continental part of the Croatia.

The complicated geographical, political and strategic situation, the occupations of the Croatian lands during the history greatly influenced the production and the reading of books among the Croats.

From the Middle Age onwards the Croats wrote and read books in several languages and scripts. In the cities along the coast and in the continental parts of Croatia the liturgical language were Latin. All the books, not only the liturgical one, were written in the universal language of the Catholic Church, but in the villages the books were written firstly in the old Slavic, then in old Croatian and finally in Croatian language. These books were written in glagolitic and in Cyrillic alphabet. In the cities along the coast the official language in administration and in public life was not the Croatian, but the Italian language. So, in the same time in Croatia in Middle Age there are used three languages and three alphabets.

The books in national characters were, of course, written in Croatia, but not all the books written in Latin and Italian. We know the monasteries and cathedrals where the scriptoria worked for centuries, but we have also many documents about the importations of Latin and Italian manuscripts. So, the priests, monks, learned men read in Latin and Italian language and at the same time the priests in the villages read books in the national language and characters. This cultural situation persisted for centuries, in some parts of Croatia until the XIX century.

During the Middle Age common people in the villages were absolutely illiterate and only toward the end of this historical period the first schools out of the church institutions were founded. These schools were founded by the city authorities for the future functionaries, servants, city clerks, merchants, public notaries etc. indispensable for the function of the mediaeval cities. We know that many among them have had in their houses small libraries with 10-20 volumes mostly in Italian and Latin language.

In Renaissance period the number of the house libraries grew more and more and increased also considerably the number of books of classical (Greek and Roman)

authors and especially the books of the great Italian writers and poets, e.g. Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio etc.

It is necessary here to stress the enormous role of the Latin language in Croatian culture. A great number of learned Croats from the Middle Age onwards lived abroad, mostly in Italy, Germany and Hungary, and all those theologians, philosophers, physicians etc. wrote in Latin. Not only the Croats scientists and writers living abroad, but even those living in Croatia wrote their essays, historical studies, mathematical works etc. in Latin. The Croat common people were not able to read those books, but in the other hands all learned men in Europe read their books.

So, the Latin was the language of communication between the Croat scholars and the learned Europe. Incidentally, the Latin was for many centuries the only language understandable to all educated Croats in littoral and continental Croatia. I remind you that the Croatian language is divided in three dialects and that each of them developed their own book production. The differences between them were so great that common people in one region could barely understand a book written in the dialect used in the other region. So, the popular books written in kajkavian dialect in the continental part of Croatia was illegible for the Croats in littoral Croatia (Dalmatia, Histria, Dobrovnik et.). This curious situation continued for centuries until the decision of the leaders of the National Movement in Mid-Nineteenth century to choose the štokavian dialect spoken in Dubrovnik and in Bosnia to official or literary language for all Croats.

From the XVI century the vernacular dialects became the usual language both in littoral and in continental Croatia, especially in the popular books but in the course of time also in the books of medicine, agriculture, fishing etc. written for the common people. The vernacular language was used first of all in the prayer-books. Many of them were printed by the protestants in Germany and in Croatia, then by the jesuits and franciscans in continental Croatia (especially in Zagreb). Firstly the protestants and then the catholics divide among the common people prayer-books printed in Croat language.

Many writers from the Renaissance onwards wrote their books in vernacular language for the common people who knew read only in this one. The writers Marko Marulić, Petar Zoranić and many others explicitly stressed in the prefaces of their books that his intent is to bring their works closer to the common people. For this reason those writers not only wrote in their mother language, but adapted their style and phrase to the intellectual level of the people of poor literacy.

In the long period stretching from the Renaissance all the way to the Croatian National Movement (mid-nineteenth century) there were many group of readers in the Croatian lands depending upon the language used at home, in the everyday communication, and their social position. In the cities the priestes, monks and the whole clergy and the learned community read books in Latin, Italian (in the littoral) and german (in the continental parts of Croatia). In the Croat lands under the Turkish occupation people read books written in Oriental languages (arab,turkish, persian). Some of these books were written in Croatian language, but with arabian characters (the so called with Arabian characters (the so called *aljmiado literature*).

There are many differences in the kind of books registered in various parts of Croatia. In littoral parts the learned community read religious books in Latin, and the Italian literatur, historical and other scientific books imported from Italy. The learned men of Zadar, Split Dubrovnik, Zagreb etc. returning to homeland from Padova, Bologna and from the other Italian university centers brought scientific and other books and created in their houses very rich private libraries.

In the archives of Zadar, Dubrovnik etc. we found the lists of books, included in testaments of library owners and we can read the names of authors and the titles of his works. Until the end of the XVIII century the contents of those private libraries reflected the intellectual interests of the owners. Therefore, very rarely in those libraries we find the unscientific, frivolous and similar literature.

In the nineteenth century the structure of the private libraries changed. In the continental Croatia ladies, married and unmarried, read cheap German books, and so the private libraries in the cities filled more and more with German novels or French, English etc., but in German translations. The very well organized booktrade between Zagreb, Varaždin, Osijek etc. with the great booksellers in Leipzig, Graz, Vienna etc. provided the booksellers in Croatia with virtually all book production in Europe.

In XIX century the Croat patriots were engaged in fight against germanisation in the continental and the italianisation in littoral Croatia.

Many circumstances helped their efforts. Firstly the advances of the strong national typography, then the expansion of the scholastic system, especially the elementary one, but first of all the awakening of patriotic feeling among all the strata of the Croatian society.

However, the complicated political situation caused a serious troubles in Croatian culture, including in the production and reading the books. The fall of the Venetian Republic and consequently the cessation of the centenary Venetian occupation of the Croat littoral, determined the end of a long period of the domination of Italian culture in Dalmatia. But unfortunately the end of this domination was not the end of foreign domination of the east part of the Adriatic Sea. Very soon the Venetian occupation was replaced by French and then by the Austrian. The language of administration and the public communication during the long Austrian rule became the German. For more than one century the German language dominated in the everyday life in Croatia and only the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in 1918 changed definitely the position of the books in Croatia and of the Croats as well. In meantime the retreat of the Turks from the Croatian lands stopped short the production of books in Oriental languages.

In the meanwhile during the XIX century the book became cheaper and accessible to all peoples. More and more many people buy books which were not indispensable to them. The catalogues of the private libraries show the fact that the contents of those libraries did not reflect the intellectual interests of the owners because those libraries were full of books which probably never be read by the owners. For this reason the catalogues of this time often give us a wrong information about the reading habits of the owners.

Well, this is not a phenomenon specific for the Croats. You know that today the private libraries all over the world are full of books absolutely unnecessary to the owner.

Very important source of information about the reading in Croatia are the printed booksellers catalogues. A great number of those catalogues is preserved from all parts of Croatian lands, but the majority belongs to the town of Zagreb which became in the XIX century a cultural and political center of Croatia.

Usually the printed catalogues hold the titles of books interesting to the middle class of the urban population. The booksellers have had a good feeling for the citizens' interest for specific kinds of literature and ordered from Germany, Italy etc. precisely that kind of literature. There is no doubt that the booksellers knew very well what books were needed in Croatia and for this reason the printed catalogues of booksellers precisely revealed the reading in the various regions in Croatia.

However, those catalogues are not always a sure source for the reconstruction of the structure of book reading in Croatia. The reason for this insecurity is the cheapness of the books in XIX century. Many people buy many books, but they never actually read.

On the other hand many categories of popular books (e.g. prayer-books, almanacs, calendars, school-books etc.) were not included in those booksellers catalogues. Those books were sold only in the churches and by the ambulant booksellers. It is why a big part of the popular literature were never mentioned in the booksellers catalogues, yet exactly this literature was read by the majority of the people, especially those living in the country.

Much better estimate the reading habits in the Croatian population in cities can be gotten from the printed catalogues of the subscription or lending libraries. The members of those libraries borrowed only books for personal reading or for members of his families and it is likely that these books were really read.

The catalogues of subscription libraries in continental Croatia are full of books in German language, but in littoral parts they contain mostly the Italian books. In any cases the borrowers take out the book exclusively for reading, so the evidencies of those libraries about the borrowed books and about the borrowers itselfs is for us the best documentation about the reading. As an example, we can mention the printed catalogue of the subscription library founded by Emil Hirschfeld, the German bookseller coming in Zagreb from Bremen (Germany). In this catalogue from 1842 he listed 2144 titles. Only 100 books were in French, the other were all in German language. There were no Croatian books in this catalogue.

Similar catalogue printed 1856 in Varaždin the bookseller J.J.Prettner. in fact, almost all the books listed were in German language, a few were in French, but not a single one in Croatian.

The structure of the books in subscription libraries continued to change and by the second half of the XIX century the fraction of books in Croatian language (original or translated from the foreign languages) grew more and more. So in Zagreb in 1858 were printed a catalogue holding 834 titles among them 101 in Croatian language.

It is interesting to note that the owners of those subscription libraries were often publishers and printers who also published some Croat books, but those books never appeared in their own catalogues!

All the time the leaders of the Croatian National Movement and the other patriots were engaged in fight against the German, Italian and other foreign books. One of the most prominent leader of this political movement, the count Janko Drašković published in 1838 a booklet in which he pleaded to "Illyrian" women to cease to read German books and to begin to read Croatian ones. He requested with an active participation of the women in the national movement. by helping the affirmation of the Croatian book. It is intriguing that the count Drašković wrote this appeal to the Croat ladies in German language, not in Croatian, evidently because the count knew that they weren't able to read in their mother language.

In the littoral parts of Croatia the situation was not very different. In Rijeka for instance, the bookseller Ercole Rezza founded a subscription library and 1856 published three catalogues, one containing titles of books in Italian language, the second containing the German, and the third with books in French. In this time in Rijeka lived 78% Croats, 5,5% Germans and only 10 persons (mostly merchants) who declared himself as French. Not a single book in those catalogues were in

Croatian language. Of course the Croats in Rijeka read books in their mother language, but they couldn't borrow them in Rezza's subscription library.

This complicated and anxious situation was not prevented by historical events before the first decades of the XX century.

This unhappy and in some elements chaotic linguistic and cultural circumstances, I believe unique in Europe, had indeed very bad consequences for the reading in Croatia. But, on the other hand we cannot abnegate some positive consequences of this situation, because the people reading books in various languages, were in permanent contacts with the European literature and science.

Still, these positive effects of the multilinguistic reading in the past, are present even today. In fact, many people in Croatia can fluently speak and read books in many languages.

I insisted in my paper about the linguistic situation in the Croatian lands during the history simply because it is the factor which was determining the position of book in Croatian society and the reading as well.

At the end of my speech I must conclude that the small Croatia during the history used in books to many languages and to many scripts. Perhaps for this reason it was a very good idea to discuss just in Croatia the subject Literacy without boundaries.